Transcript of an Interview with Chief Mi’Sel Joe, August 10, 2005*

Interviewer: Kim Gillcrist  
Location: Conne River, Newfoundland and Labrador

Gillcrist: Thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview, I really appreciate it. They’re tossing me in the deep end first thing in the morning!

Joe: And what better way to learn how to swim!

Gillcrist: That’s right! So in what ways has the community’s path to self-governance touched your life?

Joe: The practice of self-government?

Gillcrist: And the process of it – ever since you began…

Joe: I think in a sense we’ve been practicing self-government that goes back hundreds of years, really. It’s a small community. The organization that’s here now wasn’t here prior to 1974, but there was still a sense of governance around. For instance, when a non-Aboriginal person married an Aboriginal person in the community, they would go to the elders and get permission before they moved into the community. That wasn’t formalized, that’s just there, left over from long ago years. What we’re seeing today is a more formalized sense of governance, and to me it’s just more of the same. For our younger people, it’s giving them a sense of more of a system that’s put into place to formalize how we govern ourselves as Mi’kmaq people. And I see people becoming accustomed to that sense of how we do things as a government.

Gillcrist: So when did you come to be a part of the process? Ever since you were young?

Joe: I’m 58 years old and my memory of the government system that was here goes back that far. Being around my grandfather and older people in the community showed me how those things work. So it seems I’ve always been a part of it.

Gillcrist: Could you tell me more about your role in the process of attaining self-government?

Joe: My role has been left… in a sense that… leaving the role of discovering self-government has been left to the community itself. I remember attending the first meeting, and I was asked very politely by band members to leave because it was a grassroots process. And I have very much respect for that, because that’s

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what it is. If it doesn’t come from the people themselves then it’s not really government. I understand their need to understand the process that we need to go through as a government, and they’re doing that. So when we get to the end of the line in terms of the five years, the process will be totally done by, and understood by, the grassroots people. And that’s what it’s supposed to be. My involvement is, in a sense, no involvement; but to take direction from the community and move that forward, whatever that direction may be: being involved with the committee, being involved with the negotiations, all of those things come from the direction of the people. That’s my involvement, taking direction from the community themselves, and the members themselves.

Gillcrist: What have your best experiences been?

Joe: My best experience… they’re all good experiences because every time you sit down to speak to a band member about concerns they may have with the process, in some way or another they end up educating you even further about our own system. I think the best experience is just talking to the people and understanding sometimes what their fears are, and their understanding of what the process is all about. And being educated a little bit more of what we might have missed along the way, what we consider to be trivial sometimes may be a major thing for them in terms of... one of the questions we get asked a lot is: “Will we still be Canadian citizens if this process goes through?” or “Will we lose our pensions?” And those are questions that need to be answered and fears that need to be put to rest. Those are the things we deal with.

Gillcrist: OK. [Bits of conversation in between]
What have been the most challenging obstacles or barriers to overcome throughout the process?

Joe: Patience. Having the patience to see it through. Having the patience to deal with the trivial questions that come forward all of the time. Each one of them has to be looked at and questions and concerns given back. I would think that the test of all the patience of the group to make it all work on behalf of the community.

Gillcrist: So what does self-government in Conne River mean to you?

Joe: It means that we can put together a traditional form of our own laws, looking at our own judicial systems of how it used to work in the past and how we can mold those two together, the new and the old, and make them work for us. Looking at our own constitution again, from the old days and mention that to constitution of a new form of government. Being more accountable than we are right now – and that’s hard to believe. We are extremely accountable at this stage. Have a clearer glass window that we can look through and have our band members look through so that they’re comfortable with everything that we do – that every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed and that the information is always
readily available for them when they need it. So all those things are part of how I see self-government working and being a full government in a third level of government in this country and whatever comes with that. Being free!

Gillcrist: So how do you see self-government working for your children and your grandchildren and the community?

Joe: Opportunities that we never had will certainly be there. In terms of what they get in services from us and from the government, flexibility to do many things that we can’t do now in terms of funding. I even hope that some day we can even have our own college or university right in this community as part of what we’re trying to do. Hospitals, whether they be cottage hospitals or major hospitals, something more than we have right now for our people. And allowing us the flexibility to do the things we need to do on behalf of this community.

Gillcrist: So can you describe how you think that self-government will affect your community on a more day-to-day basis… having your own hospital available, bigger schools and things like that?

Joe: Well you know, that comes in with all the things that come under that umbrella of self-government: Having the constitution written by our people, for our people. Having our own judicial system set up that’s working on behalf of this community. Having our own prosecutors, judges, it will be a full fledged government no different from any other government except that it’s an Aboriginal First Nations government based on ancient laws and customs of the Mi’kmaq people of Newfoundland.

Gillcrist: OK. And my question says here “If you are familiar”, but I know that you’re familiar with the exploratory process of self-governance and your developmental phase before you jump full-fledged into it, then how do you think the process was handled not only by the community, but also by the federal and provincial governments throughout the whole entire negotiation system?

Joe: I think that the community came into this with open arms and trusting, and ready to move forward. I think that the government got caught, at least from my point of view, got caught a little bit in the sense that we’ve been telling them we’re ready for some time and all of a sudden they’re knocking at our door saying “we want to go now, we don’t want to wait until all of this other stuff is settled at this stage. We’re ready to go, let’s move.” I don’t think they were quite ready to move when they said they were, so a little disappointing in that because, after all, the Federal Government and the Province of Newfoundland have always said that we are one of the model communities in Atlantic Canada and we wouldn’t dare move forward if we thought for a moment that we weren’t going to move. So they’re a bit slow off the mark, but it came through. It still takes a lot of patience in terms of negotiations with the federal government at this stage. There’s always going to be someone that doesn’t quite understand how this
system works. Again, rely on the basis that we do all of the things in the governance of this community.

**Gillcrist:** So maybe their hesitance here is more for lack of understanding?

**Joe:** I would think so, and not realizing that we were as far advanced as we thought we were.

**Gillcrist:** So what kind of advice can you offer to other First Nations communities?

**Joe:** Follow your gut. If you have a good feeling about it and you have the support of band members, then move forward. That’s what it takes. And the bottom line is that the grassroots people lead the charge because it’s their process. All we are at this stage is the people that work for the community. It’s their process, and if it’s not their process it won’t work.

**Gillcrist:** Are there specific things that the community needs to have, to do, or to prepare in order to endeavour into the process?

**Joe:** What we did here was have a series of consultation meetings with the community, talking about self-government, talking about the election act, about all of the things that we do now, and from those discussions put together a roadmap to follow in terms of self-government and allow the community to play a major role… not allowing, that’s the wrong word… but it’s encouraging band members to play lead roles in that process. And every idea that came forward was a good idea. And every idea was explored. At the end of year one, year two, however long it takes, there is no magic time limit on this – it can only happen when it’s supposed to happen, and when that process is ready and everyone is happy with the process, then you move forward with that information. Then you’ve got a good platform to move forward with.

**Gillcrist:** So if the process were to begin again from the very beginning, would you make any changes to things that have happened?

**Joe:** Absolutely not. I wouldn’t have even gone to that first meeting [laughs]. That’s all I’d change. Let it be the way it was, because it works fine. And you need people like Judy White to move those issues forward. Without someone like her to play the lead role… and the other part of that is band members have to be comfortable with someone like Judy to open up their hearts and speak what’s on their mind. And I’ve heard people say that sometimes I hesitate because I think it might be silly, but she makes people feel comfortable, even with the silly questions. And sometimes with the silly questions you get a really good question and concerns that come forward that need to be addressed. And band members need to feel comfortable about what they’re doing, and comfortable enough to express themselves no matter what the questions are, and that works really well.
For that reason I don’t think there’s any place for politics to be involved in that process. Politics will be involved once the process is done. Then the politicians will be involved, but at this stage the ownership has to be with the community.

**Gillcrist:** So, as you know, we’re documenting the process of your route to self-government in Mount Allison. Who do you think will benefit from this initiative and why?

**Joe:** Hopefully the beneficiaries of this process will be this community. Even at the end of the day after the five years, once we’ve done all of this work and it’s still not acceptable (heaven forbid), it’s still a good process to go through. I think it’s brought the traditionalists together with the non-traditionalists. It’s brought people that sit on the fence, they’re neither for nor against, to the table. I think it’s raised the awareness in the community of what we’re doing now in terms of our own governance we have right now. So it’s done many things in terms of all of those. It has now been five years and we have an incredible amount of information we’ve gathered to move onto the next process, whatever that might be.

**Gillcrist:** Now is there anything else that you feel is significant that I haven’t asked you, anything you’d like to add to our interview?

**Joe:** No, I can’t think of anything at this stage.